

When Autumn Leaves by rosswrites

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Abuse, Also Blood, Alternate Universe, Angst, Autumn, But its fun, Depression, F/M, Fluff, I have no idea what I'm doing, Mentions of Anxiety, SO MUCH FLUFF, Slow Burn, and a lot of other angsty shit that i haven't written yet, and emotional disturbed children, and poorly written action, but there's fluff, excessive detail, graphic depictions of october, haunted houses?, hella slow burn if im completely honest, hella slowburn, its the eighties and there should be bikes but oh well, like there's so much fall that this is almost like i wrote an ode to fall, multi chapter love story, nosebleeds are not helpful in this universe, tons of walking

Language: English

Characters: Dustin Henderson, Eleven | Jane Hopper, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Scott Clarke, Will Byers

Relationships: Eleven | Jane Hopper/Mike Wheeler

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Summary:

In an AU where Mike Wheeler is the new kid, what kind of shenanigans will happen when El Hopper starts to fall for the boy with his own demons? Will El come to terms with her own problems or will everything she knows fall apart? What happens when autumn leaves? It's a tale of monsters, haunted houses, mystery, broken hearts, and everything in between.

1. Prologue

Author's Note:

All of my fics (and shorter, better writing) is available on tumblr @el-and-hop!

Summary for the Chapter:

The new neighbor is interesting. And El is very very very interested

Notes for the Chapter:

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Let's assume it was early October.

It was colder in Hawkins than it has been in fifty years. And this Saturday morning was somehow even more bitter than before.

The Houst family up the road took out their traditional plastic pumpkins and mounted them on stakes in their front yard. The Donahues, a few houses over, decided that this years theme was "graveyard ghouls."

Each house on the small circle had something orange.

Well, almost every house.

Rumor had it that the family was forced to leave the city. Talk of a "new home for a disturbed child." Susan, the pharmacist, said she heard from a friend that the family was 'bad energy.' Rumors were more than rumors in Hawkins, though. Everyone knew that there was some truth to every lie.

As El Hopper sat on her porch, watching as the moving trucks piled in seemingly endless cardboard boxes and plastic wrapped furniture into the house across the street, she couldn't help but wonder what would draw in such an *average* family to a place like Hawkins,

Indiana.

Studying their moves as she fiddled with her diary, El started to take notes. Not detailed notes, but images that she'd go back to later or maybe show to her friend Will for artistic inspiration.

The father is boring. Mother cares about her children and the dishes. The brown haired girl is distant. The blonde haired girl clearly isn't her fathers daughter. The boy is sort of cute.

After scratching out the last line, El closed her diary and sighed. *Whoever this boy is, he'll make life interesting, even if his family is as boring as they seem.*

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you for reading! I'm super new at multi-chap fics so any advice is greatly appreciated! Let me know what you think!

2. There's A Lot of Hurt

It was cold in early October. Indiana was bracing for another brutal, lifeless winter.

A young girl, no older than thirteen, sat alone on the front steps of her porch, counting each school bus as it passed by. It was Monday morning, and her friend was supposed to be here. Twelve minutes ago. She could feel her breath getting warmer and her fingers digging into her knees.

Slowly rocking back and forth, she began to scan her surroundings. It was a technique her father taught her whenever she felt another attack creeping its way in.

The front porch was normal. White railings, brown floorboards, a swing on one corner with worn, faded yellow seat cushions on one side and bare metal on the other. It sat in the corner, and, on the opposite side of the porch, sat two wooden chairs, mismatched and slightly rotting with a small coffee table resting between them.

It was used more as a footrest than a coffee holder, but the name explains the stains of circles that surround the edge close to the larger of the two chairs. You wouldn't guess that it had seen death and heartache and love and warmth, not at least by how it looked. Any other resident of Hawkins would laugh at the table, but they weren't the one using it, now were they?

The warm hue of the floorboards on the porch mixed and, when the sun was right, matched with the two pumpkins that sat on the edge of the stairs to the heavy wooden front door. Neither were carved, yet, out of fear of rotting, so they sat idly there. It would be a week before halloween when they were cut open, their innards spooned out, and their faces sawed on. But today, they sat without care for tomorrow.

The only thing that held on to the traditional aesthetic of Hawkins was the yellowish glow of the tin lamp as it swayed above the doorbell. Back in 1860, the original owner had improperly installed a gas lighting system, and before he could turn off the hose the house was gone and his life destroyed. The structure of the house, of course, was rebuilt, the gas lamp now replaced with electric and fancy wire filaments.

“El?”

A small, slightly cracking voice called out and pulled El to the present. A boy, even smaller than his voice, had knelt down in front of her without her noticing. She could feel her chest moving in and out as the cold air dried her throat. The boy grabbed hold of her hands, removing their tight grip on her fingers had on her knees.

“You’re twelve minutes and fifty four seconds late, Will,” the girl whispered with more air than words. She stared at his eyes and studied their dark canyons.

“Jonathan’s car wasn’t starting so I had to bike here,” Will began, still kneeling before El. “You’re just having another panic attack.”

“That boy across the street,” El said, motioning to the house on the other side, “the one that I was telling you about? The one that moved in on Saturday? I think he’s going to school with us.”

“Well,” Will laughed, standing up, “we better get there before he does so you can keep stalking him.”

El stood up, grabbed the backpack that was resting beside her, and threw it at Will. Rather than hit him, though, it landed in the grass beside him.

“Hey, I’m not the one that wrote ‘he’s cute’ in your journal,” Will scoffed, mounting his bike.

“You’ll be head over heels for him too.”

Will rolled his eyes at her, and motioned for her to come along.

El, sighing, reached under the porch and pulled out her own bike.

In silence she mounted and rolled down the driveway, meeting Will at the end, and, like clockwork, they were off, only set to be a few minutes behind schedule.

The hallways were more crowded than normal, as the heavier winter coats had made their appearance earlier than expected. The groups of students huddled together and formed small circles to bring their body temperatures up from the brutal chill that was lingering outside.

El struggled to make her way down to her locker through the seemingly endless wave of knit hats and leg warmers. She was never one for heavy winter wear. More or less she loved layers, jeans with flannels, multiple jackets, gloves on gloves; anything that kept her from looking like a puffy version of the carpet floor at the arcade.

And since there were so many students in the halls, she cursed the fact that her locker was at the other end of the building from the main entrance. Slipping and sliding through the crowd after what felt like five minutes for a thirty second walk, she appeared at a clearing, right at her locker.

It was a sad locker. Her friend Max got lucky this year and was awarded a top locker, making her a queen amongst her peasant friends. El's locker was at the bottom, a corner bottom, right next to the bathroom door. And the locker squeaked. *Loud*. She also had an "illegal" unlocking mechanism (a stack of small Post-it Notes stuck in the door) that kept her locker from doing the one thing its name implied while appearing to be 100% normal. *It was the simple things that make life so much easier.*

And normally she was in and out quickly.

But this day there was an issue.

The normally unoccupied locker above hers was currently occupied. And shit. It's her neighbor.

He's just as bundled up as everyone else in the hall: heavy coat, jeans, brown church shoes?, a striped polo tucked in, and dark brown hair that was fighting some kind of invisible straightening iron. He was holding a small slip of paper in his left hand, and with his right hand he was frantically spinning the lock to try and get it open. *It's not working.*

El had two options, neither were ideal.

The first: forget her locker, avoid interaction, turn around, and make due for the first four periods until lunch when she could switch out her books.

The second: Help the poor boy.

But by some higher power right as El starts to flip an invisible coin in her head the boy with the frantic hair whips his locker open and all of the tense muscles in El's body relax.

Realizing that she'd been staring at him, she pulls off her backpack a few lockers down and starts to fiddle with the notebooks inside. *Don't let him see me. Don't let him see me.*

But like wind he was gone without notice. And El took that as a green light to throw open her locker, shove in whatever looked important for the morning, knock the locker closed with her elbow, and sprint down the hall to first period.

History was first. It was a pointless class if El could be completely honest. She spent most of it doing her homework for Math (second period) and writing in her journal, which, luckily, looked close enough to notes that the teacher, Mr. Harold, didn't bother her.

Sitting herself down in her unassigned signed seating, El slumped and didn't feel like taking anything out of her bag. It was that kind of day.

“Wake up sleepy eyes,” came a voice from El’s left side. She turned her head and saw a redhead girl who still had her coat fully zipped. She already had her textbook and notebook on her desk and was clearly more awake than El was.

El sat up, stretched out her arms in front of her, and then reached down into her bag to pull out her journal. Something was off. The classroom was too quiet. El looked to her left and noticed that the chair that was normally occupied was empty and cold.

It was Dustin’s seat. And it had been for the last month and a half. El, Max, and Dustin sat together first period, second row, so that they weren’t the first prey of their slowly dying teacher. El could swear that the old man in the front of the room couldn’t see past the first row of desks. And that made life so much easier.

“Max,” El whispered to the girl sitting next to her. “Where’s Dustin?”

“I don’t know,” Max replied. “I just assumed he was with you.”

“Quiet, Mayfield,” the Mr. Harold said with just enough force to make El wonder if he was going to give himself a heart attack. Max rolled her eyes and open up her notebook to a fresh page.

El and Max were friends. No, they were sisters. With El living with her adoptive father and Max stuck with her abusive step-father, shitty step-brother, and aloof mother, they turned to each other for everything. Not that El didn’t have a great home. She had a father that loved her. And she had Max. On too many occasions did Max spend the night at El’s house. Enough times that Max has a permanent room there. They weren’t biological sisters, so the fact that they act like it makes their bond something so much stronger.

And that’s why, when a dark brown haired mess of a child bursted through the door disrupting the Mr. Harold mid sentence and caused the entire class to glare at the him, the first thing El thought about was if Max was going to notice who this boy *really was*.

El felt the sides of her face begin to heat up, so full of second hand embarrassment that she felt like she was going to start looking like a tomato. And if Max were to catch on, El would never hear the end of

it.

“Wheeler, correct?” Mr. Harold lowered his glasses and peered above them, taking in the frazzled boy. “Michael Wheeler?”

Michael, as Mr. Harold called him, stood in the front of the room. His hands were shaking, a bit of sweat collecting on his forehead, and he was breathing heavily enough that El could surmise that he probably sprinted down the hall trying to find the classroom.

“Well,” Mr. Harold said with sarcastic tone, “take a seat next to Eleanore. She’ll get you up to speed.”

El felt her heart crawl up into her throat. *His name is Michael?* She hated to admit it, but she almost felt sorry for that. *First the house across the street, then the locker, and now History class?* She looked at the clock hanging on the wall. Class started at eight. It was ten past eight. El sighed.

As the boy made his way to the empty seat next to El, she pulled out her textbook from her backpack and set it down on her desk. Her backpack was about as neat as her locker. That is to say, it looked like a wastepaper basket. Crumpled papers, trash, and broken pencils were mindlessly tossed inside.

El placed her textbook on his desk and smiled.

“Here,” she said, with a soft whisper, “we’re on page one hundred and ten. Chapter quizzes are on Fridays. Homework is written on the board for the next day.”

El watched as the mess next to her began flipping through to the correct page. His writing, she noticed, as he opened up his notebook, was pure chicken scratch.

Once everything seemed to calm down and Mr. Harold’s monotonous voice began to linger in the air like the hum of a fan, El started to drift off. And she got a few seconds of bliss before the classroom door creaked open again.

“Henderson! You’re twenty minutes late,” Mr. Harold mocked, as he stood in front of the chalkboard. “Late note or detention: which will

it be?”

El did everything she could to avoid eye contact with Dustin as he stood in the front of the class, searching through his pockets for what El could assume to be his note.

“Here,” Dustin said with a smile, handing the teacher a crumpled piece of yellow paper.

Mr. Harold’s face went from tense to nothing short of defeated. He ran detention, and getting to make students miserable was his favorite thing to do.

Dustin turned to go to his normal seat next to El, but was greeted with a stare from Michael.

If it could be described in any way, El would probably have to say that it was like one of those show downs on the old western movies that she would watch that came on before her favorite soap operas. The two boys locked eyes, neither blinking, for one second that felt like minutes. Part of El wanted to nudge the poor soul next to her, get him to move for a day, explain to him that *while, yes, it is unassigned seating, it’s an unspoken rule that if you sit there your first day you don’t change it and you came in and took Dustin’s seat, what did you expect?*

“Take your seat, Henderson,” Mr. Harold said, with more disdain than before.

Dustin looked around the room before catching sight of one open chair, in the center of the front row. He took a deep breath and sighed. El watched as he sat down and mindlessly through his bag on the ground and sat hunched over with his head down on the desk.

“Henderson, I don’t care what was going on before class, get your head up and pay attention.”

Dustin didn’t move.

Mr. Harold crossed his arms and stood in silence for a moment, waiting for Dustin to listen. Dustin didn’t.

“That’s it,” Mr. Harold said as he walked over to his desk and pulled out a packet of pink paper. “Detention. After school.”

All El heard from Dustin was a groan. She looked over to Max, who was just as surprised as El expected her to be. El then turned around to her right to see Michael, with his head in the textbook.

El looked down at her open journal in front of her. She had only written the date. Frustrated, she closed it with a bit too much force. Placing her head on her hand and her elbow on the desk, El turned to stare at the clock. She counted along with it, each second as the minute hand slowly moved from number to number

When the bell rang at the end of class, El packed up her journal and hightailed it out. Math was next, all the way at the other end of the building, and she really wasn’t in the mood to be late today. She heard her name called, but chose to ignore it. She really wasn’t up to it today.

Math came and went, since none of her friends were in the class with her. Dustin was in Science, but since it was a lab day, El wasn’t able to explain the situation to him.

It was finally lunch.

The one time of the day when El and *all* of her friends were together. It wasn’t freedom, but it was as close as it could be.

By the time El made it through the lunch line and had a plate full of french fries and assorted vegetables, she saw her friends already grouped together at their normal table.

“I’m telling you, Iron Man would defeat Batman in seconds. Think about the technology he’s working with. Fists are no match for guns!”

El saw Lucas nearly standing up in his chair across from Will, using a french fry as pointer. Lucas was dating but not really dating Max. But

Lucas was El's friend long before Max made her way into Hawkins. Lucas lived just a few houses down from El. They practically grew up together. So you can see the bond El was in when Lucas and Max started not really dating but dating.

Will, on the other hand, joined the party in first grade. He lives farther out of the town, but that doesn't stop him from being with everyone whenever he gets the chance. While Lucas was loud, Will was the quiet giant. Smarter than hell, which is why he and El don't have classes together, and kinder than a puppy.

"Just because Batman doesn't kill that doesn't mean he's any less powerful than a man who is nothing without his suit!" Dustin was walking a line between calm and livid. The spilled milk, El guessed, came as a result of Dustin's *expressive* arm movements.

"Max," Will butted in, "if Bruce Wayne and Tony Stark were to fight with no weapons or gadgets, who would win?"

El took a seat at the edge of the table next to Max and Lucas and across from Dustin and Will. Dustin seemed like he wasn't too worked up about what had happened before, and El was grateful for that. As long as the topic didn't come up, the rest of the day could go on as planned.

"I don't think it's much of a contest," Max replied simply, acting as though there wasn't weight resting on her response. "If we're talking no weapons, Tony vs Bruce, Bruce wins."

"See! I told you..." Dustin yelled as he threw his hands in the air, only to see Max put her hands out as a sign that she wasn't done talking.

"But," Max said softly, "If it's Iron Man vs Batman, Iron Man wins."

"Max!" Will rolled his eyes and sighed, obviously not content with her answer. "You never solve anything. You're as non-confrontational as El!"

El felt a shift in the air at Will's remark. It was true, she wasn't one for confrontation and rarely did she go on the attack. It made life as

the police chief's daughter easy.

"Speaking of El and confrontation," Dustin said, casually pushing ketchup around his plate with a half eaten french fry, "who's the new kid in History?"

El directed her glance down to the fruit on her plate. *Maybe if I show that I don't want to talk about it he'll recognize that and let it be?*

"The one with the messy hair?" Max smiled as she recalled the disheveled boy from class. "What's his name?"

"Michael," El responds, still fiddling with her uneaten lunch.

"Well," Dustin remarks pointedly, "tell Michael that he has to find a new seat because I've been there since the first day."

"He took your seat?" Lucas looked at Dustin and raised his eyebrows.

"And I got a detention because Harold is sadistic!" Dustin was shouting again. "All I did was put my head down, which I do every class, and he just yelled! If I had been in the second row he wouldn't see me but since *Michael* took my seat I had to sit in the front and Harold hates people who sit in the front and don't pay attention."

"Dustin," Lucas said sympathetically, "don't you think you're over reacting?"

"I'm not overreacting!" Dustin was, in fact, overreacting.

El had been quiet for most of the discussion. And with reason. Sure, the argument wasn't about her, but it directly involved her. So it was, to her, the same thing. El noticed that Will had been avoiding his food in exchange for silent contemplation.

"Hold on," Will spoke up, "new kid, messy brown hair..."

El shot will a glare at Will that screamed *if you say one more word I will murder you*. Before Will could even break a smile a forced cough came from behind El.

"Um," El heard, and, turning around, she saw none other than the

topic of conversation. El chose to ignore Dustin's offhand comment that came under his breath loud enough to be heard but quiet enough that it was for the party and not the new kid.

"I just wanted to give you your textbook back," Michael said with a shaky voice. He held out El's textbook in front of him.

"I have a copy at home," El said with a smile. "You keep it."

It was true, El did have multiple copies of her major textbooks, even for History. It was a method she used to avoid forgetting her books at school and then having panic attacks at home when she couldn't complete her homework because she left her book at school. After the third time her father had to call the principal at night to open the doors, El thought it was best to have an extra copy, just in case.

"Oh," Michael reposed. "Thanks." He turned and made his way out of the lunch room, practically sprinting.

No one at the table spoke up, rather, they each turned to their food and basked in the quiet conversation. El felt like some kind of bubble in her stomach. She was a internalizing fumes of anger and a mix of empathy and sympathy for Michael. And without thought she converted that feeling into words without hesitation.

"You don't have to be mean to him," El said, focusing on her hands. She was picking at her fingernails unconsciously. "He seems really nice and you're not giving him a chance."

Lucas and Max looked at each other and then over to Dustin, who was still moving around the leftover food on his plate. Will was quiet and had his head down.

"We have to start working with Mr. Clarke after school today for the Science Fair project. I'm going to invite him and you could apologize to him." Even though El wasn't looking directly at Dustin, the sharp words were quite clear.

"Sure, whatever you want," Dustin said as he rolled his eyes.

"Please don't talk to me like that," El responded quickly, pulling her hands up from under the table to get her plate. Her left thumb was

covered in blood, pooling from the edge of her nail. She grabbed what was left of her lunch and, with her backpack in tow, left the table with little intent to hear his apology.

El sat through English, usually her favorite subject, and didn't participate. Rather than take notes on poetry and something about symbolism, El drew lines in her notebook. At first they were short, vertical parallel lines in the corner of the page. Then they went diagonal. Lines started crossing each other. They were heavy lines, soft lines, lines on top of lines. And by the end of the period, the entire top of her page was colored in. Lucas and Max, who were also in class, gave El her space. She appreciated that.

The last period of the day was study hall. A blessing from the school guidance counselor, who made sure El got to choose her schedule. Having the last period off made the day shorter and, occasionally, allowed for more planning for after school activities.

El had study hall alone, which was why she got most of her homework done there, when she wanted to. After the day that she had, El was ready to use this free period for what most students used it for: sleep.

As she opened the door to the English classroom that served as the study hall room, El was greeted by Ms. Bell. Ms. Bell was the closest thing El had to a mother. She was kind and understanding, more so than any teacher El previously had. She came to her when she was having issues with her friends, with other teachers, even when she was having issues that her friends didn't even know about.

And El loved her because she let her sleep.

But as El turned from the door to settle into her usual seat in the middle of the room, Michael was sitting a few rows back. *Just my luck.*

El took in a deep breath and quietly walked through the rows of

desks to her normal seat. Focusing in on her chair rather than risk the chance of looking at Michael and locking eyes, El overlooked the backpack that was resting on the floor and, with an ungraceful fall, tripped and hit the ground nose first.

It happened so fast that she didn't have time to react. Lying on the floor El felt her nose become warm and placed a finger under her nose. It was red.

In the moment that El had seen her finger Michael had rushed over and got down on his knees. He pulled a packet of tissues out from his pocket and handed them to El.

"Here," Michael laughed. "You're gonna need these."

El sat up and reached for the tissues. She carefully pulled one out and stuffed it in her nose. She took another and wiped the spot of blood that was on the floor.

The pain in her nose was petty compared to the acid that was eating away the walls in her stomach. She felt like she was in shock, as if the thought that everyone was thinking about her made her freeze.

"Michael," Ms. Bell said calmly, "take El down to the nurse."

"I can do it myself," El said with a nasally tone. As she stood up she had to grab hold of the nearest desk, her feet loose under her weight.

"Yea," Ms Bell chuckled, "that's not happening. I'm going to call the nurse and tell her to expect two people."

El started to make her way to the door and went to open it but was cut off by Michael. *This boy is going to be the death of me I swear.*

"You don't have to do this, Michael," El said, keeping her eyes on her feet to avoid another fall.

"Please, call me Mike. Only my parents call me Michael." El looked up and noticed that his hands were shaking. "And I don't think that you have much of a choice with the state you're in."

"I'm sorry to put you through this," El said softly. *Mike. It fits him*

more than Michael.

"No, it's fine. I wanted to move around a bit. I'm not very good at sitting down for a long time." Mike let out a short laugh, and El had to stop herself from smiling. It hurt her nose too much.

Normally El liked the silence. It was never awkward for her. But walking next to the boy that she had been wondering about for the last few days, El felt like there was nothing to do but get to know him.

"You're new here," El said simply. It was more of a question but it sounded more like an accusation. Mike smiled and scratched behind his ear.

"Yea, good guess," Mike joked. "I'm from Chicago but my parents thought it would be a nice change to leave the city and come out to a quieter place. I can't really argue with them."

"I was born in Chicago," El said, starting to pick her thumb again. "But my dad moved us out here. We live on Windsor street."

"I live on Windsor street too! Wouldn't it be funny if we were neighbors?" Mike continued to smile and laugh slightly. El noticed that his hands were starting to shake again. *Would this be the right time to tell him that you've been watching him from your window for the last few days?*

"I'm sorry about how my friends are," El said, turning to face Mike. He was counting the numbers above the doors. "They're not very good with letting people in. Especially Dustin. When his dad left we got a lot of the anger."

Mike only nodded and continued to walk side by side with El.

When they arrived at the nurses office, it was quiet as usual. El was friends with the nurse, as with most of the teachers. She was quiet, kept out of trouble, and was kind. That's all the teachers needed.

"Another nosebleed, Eleanore?" The nurse asked as she rummaged through the medicine closet.

“She tripped and fell,” Mike answered before El could respond.

“Oh dear,” the nurse said as she turned to see El’s face. El’s nose was stuffed with red tissues in both nostrils. The nurse pinched El’s nose and El took in a sharp breath. “I think you may have broken your nose, sweetie. Sit down and I’ll put a splint on it until you go see a doctor.”

El followed the nurses orders and sat herself on the cold metal table that was for the sick children. Mike sat down next to her and smiled when El tilted her head back so she could take out the two tissues.

“This isn’t funny,” El said as she slowly pulled the tissues out.

“This is going to hurt,” the nurse said, gently placing a cloth on top of the bridge of El’s nose.

It came like a paper cut, a quick, but immensely sharp pain that was nothing like what El felt when she fell. She closed her eyes and reached her left hand out and grabbed hold of the closest thing possible to squeeze away some of the pressure.

It wasn’t until she opened her eyes again that she realized that she had grabbed Mike’s hand and nearly broken that too. Coming to her senses, El quickly let go and placed her hand in her lap. Mike left his in between them. His hand was soft and warm, almost like her own. It wasn’t an old hand but something sweeter.

“I’m going to go and get some ice. Don’t fall again, you hear me?” The nurse chuckled at her own joke, which wasn’t even a joke in the first place. She quietly made her way out of the office and left El and Mike alone.

El wouldn’t call it electricity. She felt excited. Her heart was racing and it must have been the adrenaline because she couldn’t feel the pain that had previously rendered her nose useless. But there was something in the way that Mike sat there. He was quiet, yes, but he was respectful. It was as if he knew she liked the silence too.

El started to pick at her fingernails again, this time stopping right as the nurse returned.

After a few words exchanged about not touching it and getting to a doctor soon, the nurse sent them on their way, although there was little time left before the final bell.

In the hallway, Mike waited as El slowly made her way out the door.

“Thanks,” El said with a smile. She looked at his eyes. She never realized how tall he was, seemingly towering over her.

“No problem,” Mike replied. He kept his hands in his pockets, and El could see that his hands were shaking.

“We have this science fair project that we’re working on in a half hour. You should come and meet everyone.” El looked at him and raised her eyebrows. She studied his eyes, dark brown circles that were deeper than she’d ever seen before.

“I don’t know if that’s such a good idea,” Mike said, his hands now shaking more than before.

“Mr. Clarke’s room. Three thirty.” El turned and walked away, not worrying about the hesitation in Mike’s voice.

He was coming. She knew it. Maybe he wasn’t going to be the death of her after all.

3. What Comes Next

Summary for the Chapter:

Mike and El find themselves figuring out more about each other, and themselves in the process.

Notes for the Chapter:

I have no idea what im doing :)

Shit .

El just took off and Mike had no idea where she went. *Mr. Clarke? Who was Mr. Clarke?* He cursed himself for not running after her and asking who this teacher was and where his classroom was located in *this maze of a school .*

You would think that after getting lost twice trying to find class that I'd have seen every hallway possible. Yet Mike found himself standing back where he started, right outside of the nurse's office.

He looked down at his watch, a cheap plastic calculator watch that his father "gifted" him for his tenth birthday, and checked the time again. *Three fifteen.* He wasted fifteen minutes trying to find his locker. And now he has fifteen minutes to find Mr. Clarke's room.

Mike lifted his right hand up to his eye level and held it there. He could see his fingers shake. Closing his eyes, he listened to his breath.

Breathe in through the nose for five seconds.

Hold for eight seconds.

Breathe out through the mouth for ten seconds.

Breathe in through the nose for five seconds.

Hold for eight seconds.

Breathe out through the mouth for ten seconds.

Mike opened his eyes again. His hand was still.

Stretching his shoulders, Mike pulled up his backpack and then started walking. He didn't know where he was going, but somewhere was better than nowhere.

Each locker looked the same. The doors into the classrooms were all a light colored wood material. The white paint on the walls made Mike feel like he was roaming a ward in a hospital. He went left. He went right. He went straight.

He looked down at his watch again. *Three twenty-four.*

He took another deep breath and closed his eyes. *What if she's waiting for me?* He couldn't help but think about how she'd react if he didn't make it. There was nothing he feared more in this moment than being thought of as a stuck up fool. Already the new kid, *now with a reputation* .

This was a new start. New school, new house, new friends, new location. *New life* . And it was crumbling before his eyes.

At the end of the hall two figures moved from one side to the other. Mike could swear that one had red hair and the other brown. *It's El.*

Without hesitation Mike sprinted towards the end of the hallway. His legs felt like air, like there was nothing between him and the ground. He saw the two of them enter a classroom. *That has to be it* .

Mike took a moment to catch his breath. There's no point in coming in looking like you were lost. No one needs to know that.

Right as he was to enter the door he stopped himself. He worried about the eyes that always felt like daggers. There was comfort in them, not how they felt but a comfort in their presence. He always had eyes on him. Most of the time it could be blamed on his height and his hair. But today it was the comfort of an actor. Terrified of judgement but at ease with the company.

His mind was telling him that he could lie and go home, say he was pulled aside by a teacher to get caught up on school work, maybe say his mother picked him up early, or maybe his sister didn't want to

wait for him.

But his hand moved for him.

The door creaked open and he took a step in.

Breathe in through the nose for five seconds.

Hold for eight seconds.

Breathe out through the mouth for ten seconds.

“Mike! I was starting to think you were lost.”

El was sitting in the back of the classroom on a desk, her feet dangling in the air in front of her. She still had the splint on her nose. Next to her, the redhead that Mike had seen entering the classroom with El was sitting in a chair writing in a notebook.

“I just uh,” Mike began, taking his eyes off El and scanning the floor in front of her. “I just needed to go to my locker and get my books changed.”

“I want you to meet everyone,” El said, dropping off the desk and standing up. Her voice was still nasally, but nothing like it was before.

“Max, Lucas, Will,” El said pointing at each person, ignoring the fact that they weren’t paying attention to her. “And that’s Dustin. I think you two met already.”

Mike hadn’t noticed the three boys when he entered the room. They were at the front, each with chalk in their hands, musing over scribbles on the chalkboard. The design, Mike could see, was something resembling a catapult, although the drawing looked nothing of the sort.

“Tell me what you want and I’ll draw it,” Will said, pushing Dustin out of the way.

“Dustin,” Mike heard El call out. She had silently appeared next to him. She was shorter than he remembered. “I want to introduce you to Mike.”

Dustin turned around and came over to Mike. Lucas and Will had moved from the board and were now watching. Mike could only assume they were holding their breath as well, since the room was painfully quiet.

“Don’t take my seat again.” Dustin held out his hand as if he was offering some kind of one sided peace treaty.

Before Mike could register what was going on, a book came from the back of the classroom and struck Dustin on the side. The two of them looked to see Max standing up from her desk with raised eyebrows.

“I’m sorry for being an asshole,” Dustin said, looking down at his feet.

“It’s okay,” Mike whispered.

El crossed her arms and sighed. “It’s not okay.”

“El,” Will cautioned, “it’s not worth it.”

Will nodded to her and El responded with a deep breath.

Silence fell upon the room again. Mike didn’t want to be the one to break it. He was already the center of attention. There was no point in making it about him again.

“So,” Lucas said, elongating the final syllable. “What do you know about catapults?”

Mike felt the eyes fall upon him again.

Actor. Stage. Audience. Give them what they want .

He walked up to the chalkboard to examine the drawing closer. The physics were more advanced than they were learning that year. But it was simple equations, a plug and play of sorts.

“It looks like a mix of a catapult and a trebuchet. You have the weight system of a trebuchet in the front but also the spring mechanism from a catapult. You have too much force.”

Mike turned to see the Dustin and Lucas squint at their design. Dustin’s head tilted to the side. Both of them were somewhat lost in thought, until Dustin spoke up.

“Well, what do you suggest?”

Mike stood silently for a moment. While their plan was bound to fail, coming in and saying *your idea is horrible and I can fix it if you let me take control of the entire situation* probably wouldn’t be the best way to become part of their group. He turned to El, who, looking back up at him so he could see the whites of her eyes, nodded as if to say *just go for it*.

“Maybe,” Mike said as he started to walk up to the board, “if you stick with the catapult design, you could use half the materials.” As he was talking, Mike picked up a piece of leftover chalk and began to draw his own model. “You could get the same result and it would be more efficient.”

“I like it,” Will said with agreement, “I don’t know about you but it makes more sense to me.”

“Well if everyone hates my idea and loves that one, I think it’s pretty clear then,” Dustin said as he started to erase the old drawing. “Let’s do the damn thing.”

Mike turned to see if El was watching everything go according to plan. Instead, she was engrossed in a conversation with Max, the both of them making their way back to the seats they were occupying earlier.

Mike felt his heartbeat slow down and his stomach inch it’s way back out from his throat. *One thing at a time*.

The rest of the hour was spent with lists and drawings, schematics and textbooks, materials and planning. The rules of the science fair were explained quite simply. They had to make two different catapults. One had to be a small model for prejudgement and the other had to be a full scale working model that was able to fire a projectile exactly twenty-five feet into a basket. And they had till the end of October. *Four weeks* .

Will was the first to leave when his older brother, who's name Mike didn't catch, came by to pick him up. Dustin followed shortly after because of a "family dinner" that he couldn't miss.

That left El, Max, and Lucas. Mike packed up his things carefully. He didn't want to make it clear that he was ready to go home.

"You said you lived on Windsor, right?" El asked as she pulled her backpack straps tighter on her shoulders. Her and Max were already by the door.

"Windsor street," Mike repeated.

The way that Max raised her eyebrows made Mike think that she thought something like "are you fucking serious???"

It was awkward to say the least. Even after spending an hour under the eyes of his fellow classmates, Mike still felt as if every move he had was being calculated and averaged into a sum that would somehow determine if he was going to be allowed back into the friend group tomorrow.

He minded his own business, kept quiet, and made his way out of the classroom when prompted.

The air was different than hours before when he and El leisurely walked the halls. He watched as she walked in front of him, hands on the straps of her backpack, her worn converse squeaking as the heels dragged on the floor.

While El and Max led the way through the now empty school, Lucas and Mike followed side by side behind.

"Where do you live?" Mike didn't expect the question to come out of

his mouth. *Way to be subtle, Wheeler .*

“On Windsor, actually,” Lucas laughed. “A few houses down from El. We grew up together. Before she and Hopper moved it was pretty quiet. Then came Will, Max, and finally Dustin.”

Mike mumbled in agreement, and continued walking. The doors were approaching quickly and Mike began to prepare for the outside chill. Hawkins weather was nothing like Chicago weather.

When the doors opened, each inch of Mike’s body felt like it had been stung thousands of times. He shoved his hands deeper into his pockets and burrowed his chin into the collar of his jacket.

“You act like you’ve never been in the cold before,” Lucas said as he put his hands in his coat pocket.

“I’m from Chicago,” Mike said with a muffled voice. “You don’t spend a lot of time outside in the winter.”

Lucas followed El and Max, while Mike stayed close behind. He watched as the three of them made their way to the bike rack, where two lonely bikes were parked side by side. As Mike came closer he realized that there was a skateboard inside the front basket of one of the bikes.

Bikes. Why does it always have to be bikes . Mike’s dad had given him a bike as “incentive” to move out of the city. Did he know how to ride one? No, but he didn’t think he’d ever have to. *Only people in movies ride bikes in small towns, right?*

“Did you walk?” El asked pointely as she pulled her bike off the rack. It was old and Mike could tell it had seen better days.

Lucas had already mounted his bike, and, standing beside him, was Max, who had the skateboard tucked under her arm.

“It’s not that far,” Mike began, bringing his shoulders in closer to his ears to somehow retain more heat.

“You’re right,” El said.

Mike watched as she started to walk down the sidewalk to the road. He was flustered, not by her choice to walk in the cold when she had a bike that would get her home in half the time, but by the fact that she was so straight. There was something about the lack of conflict, how she seemed to know what she wanted and went for it. He liked that.

He also sprinted to catch up with her.

Mike didn't get to notice much of Hawkins when they came in a few days ago.

With El, Max, and Lucas focusing on the road ahead, Mike took the opportunity to take in what he hadn't seen before. The trees that lined the sidewalks and the cracking road were starting to change. Oranges and reds were darker than he imagined the countryside would be. *It's not even the countryside* . Some of the houses had to be at least a hundred years old, if not more. Big front porches, ornate doors, and spacious front yards seemed to go one after another; it was like he went back in time.

He hadn't noticed that the tree line came up to the backyards of each house. As he continued walking, with each passing gap between the houses, Mike studied their space. They were tightly knit in places, almost impenetrable, and, just a few houses down, they were so sparse that he could barely consider it a forest.

Mike wanted to jog ahead and talk with El and Max but it didn't seem right. They were keeping to themselves, probably girl talk or something, but he couldn't shake the fact that El invited him to walk with them and yet hadn't said a word to him yet. He couldn't tell if he was disappointed or angry. He knew that state too often.

The sun was setting, behind the houses, even though the sun set closer to seven than it did four. The breeze was growing colder and Mike knew it wasn't long until the group would separate.

Hawkins wasn't like Chicago. Back home, if it was quiet enough to hear your own breathing, there was something seriously wrong. He'd

grown accustomed to the barrage of car horns and trains in all hours of the night. And yet, walking down the street of houses ten times the size of their apartment back home, Mike felt like he felt oddly out of place.

It wasn't the people, though they were much slower and far kinder. It wasn't the empty fields, though they did introduce him to many more colors that he didn't even know existed. It wasn't even the new group of people he hesitated to call his friends, though they were the first ones to make him smile in a very long time. It was something in the air. As if there was a secret he wasn't privy to yet.

"We don't go out into that forest," Lucas said. Mike assumed that he'd noticed that he'd been staring off behind the houses.

"It seems like you could get lost pretty easily," Mike responded.

"They say the last kid to go exploring in there got lost and died. They never found him." Lucas looked ahead, keeping an eye on the two girls walking in front. "There's also reports of howls and barking too. They say it's wolves that make their way down from Michigan but I don't know."

"You've heard them before?" Mike questioned.

"Only once, but it didn't sound like any kind of bark I've ever heard." Lucas stuffed his hands in his pockets again.

The group of kids continued down the street, mostly quiet, with a few remarks about the cold and the homework due tomorrow. It was the kind of meandering conversation that could go for hours, but it was quietly cut off by Lucas saying goodbye and turning off to his house. Mike could see his own house from there, and a warm feeling grew in him that made up for the cold outside. People his age were close by. That was new.

And then he remembered that Lucas had said something about him and El living a few houses down from each other. *No way.*

"So which one's yours?" Max asked. She had watched Lucas drop his bike by the side of his house and smiled when he turned around to

wave goodbye. Mike sensed something between them.

"The, um, white one," Mike mumbled. He pointed to his house to make up for the jumble of words in his mouth. El had a redder face than she did when he last saw her. He found himself noticing even more about her: the way the breeze blew a stray curl from behind her ear, the way she kept picking at her thumb, and the way she looked at him with eyes that were darker than anything he'd seen before.

"You're neighbors," Max laughed, punching El on the shoulder. Mike can see El's face grow even redder. He could feel his own get warmer despite the cold.

Mike wanted nothing more than to get out of this situation but every part of him wanted to stay and get to know the two girls who kept to themselves most of the walk home. She invited him to walk with them but she didn't want to talk to him.

Mike realized it was getting awkward *fast* . *Quit while you're ahead, right?*

"I'm, uh," Mike began, feeling his hands start to shake again. "I'm gonna get going. See you in History."

El looked down at her shoes. Mike could see her fiddling with her thumb again. "Oh, ok." She replied.

And with that Mike turned to his house without a single look behind. *No sudden movements. Act cool.* He wasn't cool, though. He tripped up the stairs to the front door but played it off as if he was running up them. And once he got inside and closed the door behind him, he leaned back against the door and slid down.

He felt his heart beat fast. He wasn't much of an athlete, was rarely any good in gym class, and couldn't run a mile to save his life. And now, for reasons he didn't know just yet, the girl outside was taking his breath away.

Holy shit .

"Michael, is that you?" A voice called from the kitchen down the hall. "Dinner's already done so eat whenever."

Mike's mother, Karen, wasn't exactly the best stay at home mother. Sure, she kept the house clean and watched over his younger sister Holly, but she wasn't the most interactive of parents. He couldn't remember the last time they played a game together.

Mike tried to shake the day out of his head but each time he kept seeing pictures of El. And it started to scare him. It had been one day and he was already getting too close. The last time he made friends he changed schools just weeks later. *Distance* , he told himself . *Distance*.

Getting up, Mike made his way past stacks of boxes that lined the hallway. For living in an apartment, he didn't realize how much *stuff* they'd acquired since the last move.

He made his way into the kitchen, pulled some silverware out of the box that sat on the counter, and dug into the box labeled "dishes" for plates only to be met with fancy Christmas platters that hadn't been used in years. After resigning to eat directly from the pot of potatoes and chicken on the stove, he did his best to sneak up to his room, past his mother, so that he could avoid having to have one more conversation for the night.

It wasn't that he hated people. No, it was that he was an internal person. He needed to be alone to recharge, to decompress, to be one with his thoughts. Back in Chicago, they told him that it was healthy *to an extent* . They told him to find someone who would listen, because talking to yourself isn't ideal.

In his bedroom, Mike tossed his backpack on his bed and walked over to the window, past the boxes with all of his clothes and books and little nick nacks that he had collected over the years.

Through the glass he saw the upstairs light of the house across the street come on, and he could see a figure cross back and forth, blocking out the light. He could faintly make out brown curly hair before the curtains were drawn closed.

He placed a hand on the window and smiled. "Nice to meet you, El."

"How are you going to explain it?" Max asks, lying down on the sofa. She pulls a book out of her bag and starts to flip through the pages.

El lifts her head from her notebook at the table across the room. "Explain what?"

"That thing on your face," Max retorts. She reaches into her bag again and pulls out a pencil and starts writing in the margins.

Max's observation sparks a light in El that she hadn't thought through yet. The daughter of the chief of police Jim Hopper comes home with a seemingly broken nose? He was understanding, however, and he knew she hated lying. It was mutual trust that kept their house from collapsing in on itself.

"I'll tell him what happened," El replies. "I tripped and fell in class."

"And you honestly think he'll believe you?"

"Have I lied before?" El waits for a response but nothing comes out Max's mouth. As if Max realized it wasn't worth a fight, the two girls go back to their books.

Max then dog ears a page and sits up. "So is he in the party or was this just a one time thing?"

El looks up from her book and over at Max. She knows exactly who Max is talking about. And she really doesn't want to be having this conversation.

"Why not?" El smiles. "Do you think he's cute?"

"What?! No! If anyone it's you!!" Max spits back at El.

"For once can I think someone is nice without you thinking I like them?" In that brief moment El starts to think about what Max actually meant. Sure she noticed the little things about him, like how he was way too dressed up for the first day of school, how he smiled when he was talking about himself, how his messy brown hair matched his dark brown eyes and *oh my god*.

She could feel her face start to turn red and her stomach start to

constrict. *He's just nice and sweet and cute* . But despite all that, she couldn't help but wait to go to class again. Even History was starting to seem like it could be fun.

"What happened to her?" A voice came from across the room and as quickly as El could look up her father was already up in her face. Hopper turns to look at Max, as if he expected her to answer.

"Don't look at me," Max begins. "I wasn't there."

El feels her face getting hot as Hopper starts to fiddle with the splint on her nose.

"I tripped and fell in class," El starts. She tries to push her father's hands away but he continues. "I went to the nurse and she put this on me and said it will last until we go to the doctor."

"Did she?" Hopper says with a raised eyebrow. "Max come over here."

El has no idea what is going on and it doesn't look good. She sees Max come over and stand beside her, waiting for some kind of direction from Hopper. And the intensity of his stare at her nose isn't helping one bit.

"Grab El's hand."

"What?" Both girls respond. It's clear that Max is as confused as El is.

"Grab her hand," Hopper repeats. Max obliges.

"Look at me," He says, looking El in the eyes. She just wants to know what the hell is going on.

And, when Hopper grabs hold of the tape that is holding the splint on her nose and rips it off, El figures out what's going on pretty quickly.

She's glad only Max got to see the bright red lines that covered her face. There's a burning on both sides and she swears she can feel more blood slowly making its way down her nose.

"It's not broken," Hopper says, getting up and balling the nurses

splint in his hands. “Back in the service we went through medical training and you just bruised it.”

For all that Hopper did for her, his give and take no shit attitude made them the perfect pair. Rarely did either of them keep things from the other and they never lied. This doesn't mean there weren't fights. Oh there were fights. When two people live under the same roof and neither want to deal with bullshit, obvious tension ensues. One would leave, stay at the Byers' house for a night, and they'd make up the next day. It was a routine and it worked.

“God,” Max chuckles. “You look like shit.”

El tries crinkle her nose but the pain is still *quite present*. Instead she goes with a mouthed *shut up*.

Afraid that someone is going to try to change the conversation, El gets up and makes her way into the hall.

It's a large house for two people, but with Hopper's affinity for collecting junk, it's become quite cosy. In the large hallway stands an old mirror mounted on a dresser. To any other family, a dresser in the hall would be a terrifying misuse of furniture. But here? It was perfect.

And obviously something must be wrong with it because El can only see Frankenstein's monster instead of herself. If she shows up to school the next day looking like something out of a horror movie, she'd be the new mascot. That's what happened when Carol showed up after being attacked by a stray cat. The school just so happened to choose the lion as the spirit animal.

“I saw the Wheeler's. They invited us to dinner tomorrow night,” El hears Hopper call from the kitchen.

“Who?” El responds.

“Our new neighbors, the ones across the street? I can't stay for the whole thing but you'll be fine, right?”

El looks back in the mirror. Hopefully Mike isn't afraid of monsters.

Notes for the Chapter:

so as you can tell i have no idea what im doing. BUT ive got this planned out and its gonna get funky from here. someone said i was "world building in a slow burn" so that just makes it even more fun. Let me know what you think! I'm super excited for the next chapter because i get to go to the wonderful dark places this fic was intended to thrive in

4. The House

Summary for the Chapter:

It's never too quiet in the Hopper household

Notes for the Chapter:

Sorry it's been like 40 days since the last update.

There were three taps before she shifts under her blanket and moves her head to a cooler spot on her pillow.

It's a perk of having the corner bedroom: The unobstructed view of the street, perfect for the mornings and the evenings when she waited for someone to come, and the window on the side with the view of the neighbors.

The frame is filled with branches from a tree much older than the house it shared the lot with. And it rarely kept to itself. It liked to knock on the window whenever a breeze came by.

But the taps didn't come from the window this morning.

The house isn't haunted. That implies someone has experienced it enough times to name it.

Beyond that, nothing negative has happened yet.

It was the forest that was haunted, right?

Tap

Tap

Tap

El curls her toes and brings her knees closer to her chest. It must've gotten colder outside because her shoulders are starting to feel bare, even under her blanket and her sleeping sweater.

She hears shuffling outside of her door and opens her eyes.

The first thing she sees is her alarm clock. The soft red glow says three twenty six. She always wakes up at least once a night. She blames it on the nosebleeds.

The moonlight works better than the weak streetlamps. Her eyes adjust to the dark and the outline of the dresser across the room comes into view.

It's quiet, as it should be. The kind of quiet that brings a ringing to your ears and makes you notice the subtle heartbeat in your chest. It's a biological clock that can never keep time. At least that's what Mr. Clarke called it in health class last year.

El closes her eyes and tries to drift off. And yet she opens her eyes again and catches sight of the extra books stacked on her oft used desk.

Mike .

The thought of seeing him in mere hours makes El sigh. He hadn't talked to her after school. Or the whole walk home.

She buries her face in her pillow and is painfully reminded of why she isn't excited to see him the next morning. The thought that he wouldn't remember her face before the fall or how he might not even remember who she is crosses her mind but slowly dissipates.

She remembers they share lockers. And first period History. And study hall. Her hand starts shaking and she can't tell if its because her room got colder or if it's the thought of the boy in her head.

El decides to get another blanket. The pipes rattling in the walls tell her that there's still heat moving throughout the house, but each breath feels like she's eating snow.

Sitting up El takes a look at her desk again. Apart from the stacks of books and assorted small gifts from her friends, the only thing that she uses it for is a shrine to her family. Photos of her and her father from birthdays at the Byers', a black and white candid of her and Max opening presents last Christmas, a photo of her and her friends

at the quarry testing out their inflatable raft. She only has one photo framed. It's of her, wrapped in a blanket, no more than a few days old, held by Hopper. She swears there's a tear in his eye, but he'd never admit to it.

Who her biological parents are, El has no idea, but her family is with Hopper. There are days when she wishes she knew. Just to ask why.

Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

The ting of the branches on the window is replaced by three taps on El's door. It's not a knock or a nudge. It's like someone's standing on the other side tapping with their knuckles.

"It's open," El says, assuming it's Max on the other side of the door. Neither of them were heavy sleepers.

A moment passes. El picks up on the steady beat in her chest that seems to be picking up tempo. She places her feet on the floor but remains seated on the edge of her bed. The wood paneling feels like frozen stone.

Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

El repeats herself, this time with softer breath. "The door's open."

Tap.

She gets up from her bed and stands facing her door. She starts picking at her fingernails.

Tap .

She steps closer. She places her hand on the knob.

Tap.

She opens the door.

The only thing that El sees is her shadow reflected in the picture frames hanging across the hall.

She's too afraid to think what might be happening.

Stepping out into the hallway, loose panels of wood creaking under her weight, the silence that once screamed in her ears becomes replaced with the distant sound of breathing coming from the room a few feet down the hall.

She shifts her weight and steps towards the side, walking like a tightrope with her feet up against the wall. It's the only way she knows how to avoid the creak of the old floors. One foot after another, toe to heel, step by step.

The guest bedroom, once reserved for boxes and furniture that wouldn't fit anywhere else in the house, now became Max's home away from home. Unlike El, though, Max slept with the door open.

El peered through the doorway, half expecting Max to be faking her sleep and realizing that the prank wasn't very funny after all.

But Max was tucked under three wool blankets with a knit hat on her head. *She never did get used to Hawkins weather* . Even though her bedroom was dark, the moonlight from her window showed El a small spot on Max's pillow where she'd been unconsciously drooling. El assumed she'd been out for quite some time.

Without any explanation of what El had heard only minutes before, El decides to get back to bed. *Old houses make noise. Old houses make noise. Old houses make noise.*

After carefully making her way down the hall and back into her room, El leaves the door open and walks over to her window. A light in the upstairs of the Wheeler house is on. El stares blankly, not expecting anything to happen but instead studies the yellow hue.

Moments pass before El starts to feel her toes tingle, and, cursing

herself for not wearing socks, El crawls into bed. Before she sets her head down, El reaches over and opens her nightstand. She pulls out her her Supercom, old and worn from years of use, and turns it to channel three.

The soft hum of static drowns out the remaining ringing in her ears before she closes her eyes.

Mike Wheeler's breakfast is miserable. As usual.

While his mom *did* make him eggs and toast, he didn't get to enjoy them for lack of an alarm clock. Unfortunately there isn't a 7 am train that runs outside his house like clockwork anymore.

With Nancy already off to school with a ride from one of her new friends, Mike's left to scrounge up what little food he can so he can dig through the garage for wherever the movers stuffed his bike. He hears his mother make an offhand comment about being home in time for dinner, an obvious attempt by her to try to keep the family from *completely* falling apart. He brushes it off and tries to forget anything of the sort.

There's a breeze this morning that sends Mike back to Chicago. Everything seems to. Eating breakfast in silence, the trek to school alone, his father doing something more important than being home.

After taking much longer than it should to get his bike from the garage, Mike catches a glimpse of the house across the street.

It's emptiness leads him to believe that El and Max were already on their way. Mike can't help but feel a shutter in his chest when thinking about how old that house really is. What it was hiding, he didn't know. But whatever secrets roam behind the front doors would have to stay for a little bit longer.

Mike had forgotten what kept him up last night. That was until he steps into first period.

It wasn't the homework that took longer than it probably should have. Nor was it the anxiety of your *second* day of school.

It was the girl with the neat desk and unruly brown hair that Mike just so happened to realize seemed a lot like his own.

Noticing that the seat next to El was now occupied by the round boy from yesterday, Mike kept his eyes down and swiftly made his way into the front row. It took more effort than he expected not to turn around and look to see if El had noticed him. *Distance , Michael. Keep your distance.*

But when he started to feel his face grow warm he was happy she couldn't see him.

It's a weird feeling, knowing that there are eyes on your back, watching every move you make, but never being able to tell who or when they're pointed at you. Mike resorted to focusing on the teacher, hoping that no one would pick up on his bouncing leg.

And despite Mr. Harold's monotonous rambling and the stuttering voices of students who clearly aren't cut out for public speaking, History seems to pass in little time. By the time the bell rings, you would swear Mike was on the track team, because he's packed up and out the door in mere seconds.

That is, until he hears his name called out from behind him.

Whatever hope he had in that split second is lost when Lucas appears through the crowd of students.

"We're in Science together," Lucas says, now close enough to Mike that he doesn't have to shout.

"Cool," Mike responds. *Low stakes* , Mike says to himself. "It's that way," he questions, gesturing down the hall, "right?"

Lucas laughs and starts walking, avoiding the currents of students and teachers who form waves that so easily can make a thirty second walk take ten minutes.

For the first time since coming to Hawkins Mike feels like he's back

in a routine again. That he's settled in and has started to find the natural flow that makes normalcy seem simplistic.

He can't put it on the people, not yet, but there's something about a small town high school that keeps Mike going back to the reasons why his family left Chicago in the first place. *Quiet* , his mom would say; *slow tempo* , his dad kept repeating on the car ride; *personal space*, his doctor said.

Apart from the occasional headache and the small stomach ache that he finds himself getting each time the idea of running into El pops up into his mind, Mike would say he's doing pretty good for himself.

Science plays out extremely well. It's one of his best subjects (not that he doesn't excel in any other class; his transcript doesn't reflect the effort but only the love child of his anxiety, insomnia, and inadequate support). He also wouldn't put it past the somewhat *over* eccentric Mr. Clarke, that kind of teacher that actually made you want to come to class each day and made you upset when the bell dismissed you.

And, of course, his lab partner was pretty cool.

Science this year includes chemistry and a touch of physics, both of which Mike absolutely loves. So when lab partners were chosen, Mike was quite surprised to find Lucas dropping his backpack in the seat next to him and declaring himself Mike's lab partner.

It's a hard feeling to explain, that one where you feel like you're bursting with energy, but you know you're so calm you could perform brain surgery without a shaky hand in sight. You can say he's giddy but he will never admit to that. Yet, like a ticking clock in his throat, Mike wanted to push this excitement back down, hide it, lock it away because it was always something that seemed to run out.

Sitting in the Science classroom next to someone who he assumed called him his friend, Mike starts to wonder, contemplate if you must, what was actually going on. Where is he going, what does he have to do, how much longer does he have before it is starting all over again.

Just as that ticking in his throat picks up like that sort of countdown to the *next chapter in his life* , he feels his leg shake. He looks down at

his hand. It's no longer as still as Doctor Mike's in his head.

So, Mike closes his eyes and drowns out the hum of the lab instructions being conveyed from the front of the classroom, he mutes the tapping of the pencils from his fellow students, he pulls himself into his own head. Like an outline for his day, Mike drops each class in order, each one next to a Roman Numeral, room number italicised next to it. Under each one he sees and numbers where he has to go, how much time he has to get there, which people he knows in each class. And then he notes what's going on after school. He leaves a blank space for the dinner his mother had mentioned. It isn't fleshed out enough to necessitate a number.

Mike opens his eyes and he's back in the classroom. Lucas is there next to him filling out numbers and letters in a chart on a sheet of paper. Mr. Clarke is talking to a group of students off to the side. Mike looks at his hand. *Doctor Mike is here*.

The end of Science comes and goes. Math follows and out of the blue it's gone. It's because lunch is next.

With school being so.... *excessive*, the sense of serenity that Mike finds in enjoying lunch is irreplaceable.

Apple, french fries, and baked chicken that is about as dry as his own mouth in hand, he paces himself, grabs a cup of water, and then settles himself next to Lucas, who is already pushing around potatoes with his fork, half listening to Dustin and Will.

"I swear," Dustin sighs, "this chicken is colder than it is outside."

"Maybe you should just bring a lunch" Will says, wrapping up half of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

"And stink up my backpack with my mother's tuna?" Dustin adds emphasis on *tuna* to try and make it clear that his mother's cooking isn't the greatest in the world.

"Then stop complaining," Lucas scoffs.

Content with eating anything other than what his mother would call a *hearty meal*, Mike suffers through his now soft and soggy french

fries. It's only when the seat on the other side of him moves that he is out of a trance he barely recognized he was in.

"I didn't get to say congratulations," Max says with a smile to Dustin, "for coming to History on time."

"Bite me," Dustin replies.

Mike would normally be entertained by the repartee, but seeing El mess with her food across the table has his mouth going dry and his mind looking like his notes. That is, *really fucking messy* .

It isn't the way that she so intensely covers an entire end of a french fry with ketchup before she eats it or even the way he notices her run her free hand through her hair that make him try not to stare. It isn't even the Star Wars shirt that she's wearing under a heavy flannel. It's when she glances at him and then quickly back down at her plate.

Seeing her without the splint on her nose, Mike's able to pick up on how the curves of her face seem to all sit perfectly under her curly brown hair. There's still a faint outline of red coloring on the sides of her nose.

"We're finishing the catapult today, right?" Lucas asks to no one in particular.

"I don't know why we wouldn't," Max says with raised eyebrows, a sign of sarcasm that Mike knows all too well.

"I'm just making sure," Lucas replies. He fakes a smile and goes back to his food. "My mom's trying out a new turkey recipe tonight. You're all invited if you want to come"

Mike shifts in his seat, half warmed by the offer but still knowing that he wasn't really invited at all. It feels more like pity than anything and it starts to sit heavy on his heart.

"I can't," Dustin drops in. "Aunt's coming over."

"Is it the one from Ohio?" El speaks up. It's the first time he's heard her voice since last night and Mike remembers it perfectly (mostly because it haunted his dreams).

Dustin crosses his arms and leans back in his chair. "Does it matter?"

El parted her lips and narrowed her eyes at him. "I was just wondering."

"What about *you*?" Dustin shoots back.

"I've got the work for History," El says, eyes now on her plate.

"Will?" Lucas asks.

"Jonathan's making breakfast for dinner."

"I'll be there," Max smiles.

Lucas only rolls his eyes.

Study hall came with moments to spare.

Before, Mike would have cursed the school for giving him his only free period at the end of the day, but it feels peaceful knowing his day ends just forty five minutes earlier than it's supposed to.

Tossing his backpack in an empty chair in the back of the classroom and then settling down with his Math textbook, Mike finds a groove. It's more of a tuning mechanism, a silent XP boost that helps him turn all the sound around him into white noise, like the static on channel seven of his father's TV.

It works, as it lets him finish his homework before he notices El take a seat next to him.

"Solving for x ?" she asks, and Mike turns his head to see her open to the same page, starting to copy down the question into her notebook.

"Yea," Mike says, setting his pencil down and not so subtly brushing the hair from his eyes. "I was in geometry at my old school, so this is kind of like review."

El nods her head and gives an acknowledging, quick smile.

It's not hard for Mike to notice that she'd only written down the first problem and was only one step into the process, and was blankly staring at it as if running through every variation of the process in her head.

He resigns to flipping through the pages of his own textbook, picking up on formulas and equations he vaguely recalls, as if he's pulling memories back from a filing cabinet and he's in the library of congress.

El closes her textbook *thwump* that startles Mike. "You never said if you were going to Lucas' tonight."

The thought of his schedule, the outline in his mind, gets pulled out and the blank space he left for after school starts flashing. He remembers an asterisk next to it, and he follows it down to the bottom, where the foggy memory of his mother saying something about dinner comes to mind. Granted, it's not the best excuse, but he'll take it over the fear of coming off *too* clingy to someone he just today became friends with.

Like a pinprick back to reality, Mike thinks it best to just explain the situation. "My mom is making dinner," he starts. "I think she just wants to go back to normal."

"My dad said something about that," El says, her hands going from her notebook to picking at her thumb.

Mike really hopes the expression on his face didn't drop like the pit of his stomach.

"Dinner," El starts to explain, recognizing that Mike is completely out of the loop. "You invited my dad and I over for dinner."

With a few mumbles of agreement and nods of his head, Mike does his best to come across like he actually knows what the hell is going on. He's back in his head, picturing that quick moment this morning. His mother had mentioned dinner, but that was it. Though, now that he thinks about it, it starts to come across as strange and he's kicking

himself for not picking up on the cues that she was giving.

In that moment he's also cursing the builders of the school for making the classrooms so damn small, because he's starting to feel like the walls are closing in and it's only him and El, locked together and there's nowhere to run.

"My dad isn't the most personable," El says, turning back to her backpack.

"My dad's kind of," Mike starts, pausing to search for the right word. *She doesn't need your whole life story, Wheeler* . "...distant."

"I mean," El corrects herself, "my dad doesn't like bullshit. It's the policeman in him."

The idea of El meeting his family startles Mike. Of course, they'd be on their best behavior, at least that's what his mom hopes, but it's not like they're perfect. She'd probably take a liking to Holly, though, Mike thinks.

He's always separated himself from them. Not consciously, but more as a reactive process. Sure, they live under the same roof, but each deal with their own problems, their own life, and whether through choice or not, with their own demons. *They won't help you* , his father's voice echoes in his head. *You're on your own* .

Mike sighs and stretches his arms, the feeling of sitting in the chair now slowly tiring him out.

"You didn't get much sleep last night," El says.

He's starting to be self conscious of the bags that he knows are under his eyes. "I woke up around three but that was about it."

El doesn't respond, but instead gives an understanding nod.

"What do you mean you're not coming?"

“I’m going over Lucas’ remember?”

El wants to shout, possibly even shake Max out of her skin.

“You’re picking your boyfriend over me?” El responds, only slightly joking.

Max somehow turns even redder, shushes El, and turns her back to the boys in the front of the classroom as they continue arguing over glue. “First off,” she says, quieter than before. “We’re not dating....”

“Bullshit,” El interrupts.

Max bites her lip as if not to say something she would regret. “And secondly, they invited *you* , not me.”

El can already feel her fingers start to move towards her fingernails. She decides to grab hold of the edges of the desk instead. “You’re part of my family and you know it.”

“We’re not *actually* family, El,” Max explains.

It’s a moment before El breathes.

Max rolls her eyes and pinches the bridge of her nose. “You know that’s not what i meant. We’re sisters, but I have responsibilities outside of you and Hopper.”

She knows Max is right, but that doesn’t make her any less upset. So, instead of going on the attack, El quiets herself. *If you don’t have anything nice to say, don’t say anything at all* . Of course, that little saying had led one too many people to believe that El’s quiet nature meant she was quite bitter.

“How can I make it up to you?” Max asks.

“By coming to dinner with me,” El quips.

With a glare Max sighs *again* . “Other than that.”

It’s a rare opportunity when Max offers a deal. Mostly because she’s always right. And she *always* goes through with whatever is asked of

her.

So El takes her time. Images of junk food run through her mind, a night with no homework, a weeks allowance...there are too many options for El to think straight.

But then she starts to think of something: truth. She'd been thinking about the night before, sporadically at best, but each time she replayed it in her mind, the less it made sense.

El sits up in her chair and breathes. "Tell me how you knocked on my door and then got to bed so quickly last night."

"What?" Max asks, clearly expecting a different demand.

Slower this time, El asks again. "How did you knock on my door and then get to your room without making a sound?"

"I seriously have no idea what you're talking about."

"Last night," El begins, "You knocked on my door. When I went to open it, you weren't there. I checked your room and you were pretending to sleep."

"El," Max leans closer, "I slept through the entire night. It was probably just the pipes. I'm not lying to you."

She can feel her grip tightening around the edge of the desk. *Don't say anything at all* .

"Stop picking at you nails."

Hopper rarely used his work voice at home. It's authoritative and blunt when he talks to El. Witty and sarcastic. And at the front door to the Wheeler house, it's *really* annoying.

With his hands full carrying a store bought pumpkin pie, Hopper nods his head to the door bell, telling El to ring it *again* .

There's an unconscious tick in her mind that has her trying to flatten out the blouse that Hopper made her pull from the bottom of her dresser because they had to look *presentable* and *normal*. She would much rather have worn her favorite sweatshirt and sweatpants.

That is, of course, until Mike opens the door wearing a green and yellow striped polo. At least she looks better than him.

It's quite obvious that Mike isn't one to host large parties or even, she thinks, lead any type of gathering because his voice is so god damn shaky and almost stuttery.

"Chief Hopper," El hears a female voice call from the kitchen, "come in! Dinner's almost ready."

Hopper and El follow Mike through the front door, past walls with photos of the kids and of their travels, and into the kitchen, where they find Mike's mother, two girls El remembers seeing the day they moved in, and an older man, El only assumes is Mike's father, sitting at the table already, reading a newspaper.

Mike's mother turns around wearing an apron, dish towel on her shoulder. She cocks her head to the side and lets out an awkward laugh. "You didn't have to bring anything," she says, taking the pie from Hopper.

Hopper gives a half smile, clearly not used to the sweet talk that was only going to highlight the entire evening. "It's the least I could do, Mrs. Wheeler."

"Please, Chief," Mike's mother says, placing the pie in the fridge, "call me Karen."

"Jim," Hopper corrects, "friends call me Jim."

Watching her father struggle through the typical pleasantries that rarely if ever actually occur at home, El realises that Mike had completely disappeared. She looks around, and yet he's gone, not a spec of him in the kitchen or at the dinner table.

Normally, at this point of the dinner, if she were, let's say, at Lucas' house, her and Lucas would retreat to his room, watch tv or talk

about the newest comic book until they were called back down to dinner. In most cases, she'd say she wasn't *old enough* to enjoy *adult conversations* .

Unfortunately, the next best thing to do when you realize anxiety is rife in new situations is to stick to the closest form of comfort you know. And for El, it's right by Hopper's side.

"And you must be Chief Hopper," she hears a voice from across the room.

It turns out it came from Mike's father, a larger man, not quite the size of Hopper, but much rounder in the face and clearly on the stomach.

Mr. Wheeler greets Hopper, and, El notices, her father returns the handshake with enough force to turn his knuckles white. El only rolls her eyes. "Ted," he says sternly.

"This is El," Hopper says.

She realizes she forgot to introduce herself (though she could go through an entire party not saying a thing about herself) and puts on a fake smile.

"Is Mrs. Hopper on her way?" Karen asks, taking Ted's newspaper off the table, replacing it with dishware that makes their own look like a child's playset.

Hopper doesn't immediately respond, a tactic El remembers. When he has something strong to say, something where he needs to make his words clear and specific, he thinks. He's quiet. He's forming a sentence in his mind for a moment before anything stupid comes out.

The moment of silence goes on longer than El wants. She also knows he hates talking about life before her. "I'm adopted," El says. "It's just us."

She can feel Hopper reach down a hand and grab hold of her own and squeeze it softly before letting go.

El watches as Mike comes around the corner and she has to plant her

feet to prevent herself from going to him to get away from his father's quite judgy eyes. Though, seeing him walk up to his youngest sister and guide her to the table, El's glad she didn't interrupt him. She'd never seen anyone so delicate.

And then dinner comes. It's not the worst dinner she's ever had. That trophy goes to the Thanksgiving dinner prepared by Will's mom and her father. If you could even consider a burned turkey tv dinner a "Thanksgiving dinner." Karen's dinner was chicken, potatoes, and some sort of mystery green vegetable that was at least edible. A quick glance at each of the kids' plates tells El that she's not the only one disappointed.

She also did her best not to catch Mike's eye each time she looked up from her plate. Hopper always said she had a problem with staring. Though she can't help it when Mike looks so cute.

Hopper places his knife down on his plate and clears his throat, obviously not used to the unobstructed sound of people eating in silence. "I saw you had a digger out back."

It takes a moment for Ted to realize that Hopper is talking to him. El does her best to pretend like she didn't see Karen elbow him under the table.

"We're digging ground for a pool," Ted replies to the chicken on his fork before eating it.

If there was ever a time where El would rather be home alone eating breakfast for dinner, now would be that time. Though in the scheme of things, she hates every time she has to visit people who aren't considered family.

That feeling comes from the lingering thought in the back of her mind that she doesn't have a biological family around. Hopper's no more than a glorified babysitter sometimes, Max spends most of her time acting like a sister but the bond's even less concrete. The rest of the boys in the party are family too, but only because she knows them so well.

By the time El decides to call it quits on the mush of food she'd been

pushing around on her plate, it's clear to her that the time is approaching to get *going* .

"Coffee?" Karen asks, though not directly to anyone in particular. She does her best to clear off the smallest Wheelers' plate, who El learned is named Holly. She envies the smile that Karen gives the girl.

"Yes, please," Hopper says, in a tone El knows from late nights at home.

"Michael," Karen asks politely, "can you clear the rest of the table and get out our dessert plates?"

Like clockwork Mike rolls his eyes and is up out of his seat and pulling plates from the rest of his family. When he's across the table from her, El bites her lip and does her best to not think about the idea of this boy *serving* her. Instead, she resigns to take up her own plate, picking up Hopper's as well.

She acts about as normally as someone can in a situation like this, but Karen catches on. "Don't worry about that, honey," she says, waving a napkin at El and then at her son. "Michael?"

El shakes her head and smiles, but continues to clear up their spot. "It's the least I can do."

In the kitchen, El lets her guard down. She breathes. Processing all of the dates and facts and small nods about Mike's life is tiring. Of course, most of it is saved in the back of her mind to ask later (or for blackmail. She hasn't decided yet).

As she starts scraping the leftover scraps of potatoes from her own dish into the trash, she tries to hide the embarrassment on her face when a *thunk* comes as a result of her quite under-eaten portion.

"Sorry about that," Mike says, appearing beside her. El feels a bit better when she sees Mike empty his full plate into the trash. "About my family and all," he says quieter than before with his voice trailing off.

His voice is soft, almost comforting in a way. She remembers their conversation in the nurse's office and their vulnerability before and

now she feels like she's shedding layers. "Don't feel sorry," she says.

Mike drops a plate into the sink and then leans against the counter. "My dad and - "

" - Mike," El interrupts him, "I understand."

And the two of them continue with the dishes. Not the most flattering date, though El wouldn't even dare call it that. Of course, there were the occasional stolen glance that he'd catch when she stared at his eyes for too long. And she didn't mind when their hands brushed each others, even if it was in the *sink* .

"Go to bed, Max," El says from the sofa again, rolling her eyes. The small swinging clock on the wall ticks louder as the noise from the kitchen becomes more distant in El's memory.

She rubs her eyes and leans back again, doing her best to not melt into the cushions or fall asleep again. The old sofa has a way of becoming a black hole for everything. Especially Max's midnight snacks. Colder than she was before, El pulls down the sleeves on her shirt and digs her feet under a pillow on the other side.

It's not unusual for her to fall asleep while reading, or fall asleep watching tv for that matter. She could be having a full conversation and then within three minutes she's gone. So, falling asleep in the sofa isn't out of the ordinary. Max's venture into the kitchen late at night again must have woken her up.

"Max, seriously," El says louder this time as the noise continues. "Go to bed."

The rustling in the kitchen halts. What sounded like the squeaking of the cupboards stops and is replaced by the ticking of the clock. El picks up the book that was resting on her chest and tries to find her place on the page again. She stops when she hears the sound of something rolling on the floor.

The faint glow of the lamp behind her casts a shadow in the hallway

only bright enough to show a jar of peanut butter resting on its side. It stopped in the doorway.

El feels her heart quicken and the pace of the blood run through her temples. She remembers she didn't hear the creaking of the stairs that normally accompanies any trip up or down them. She didn't hear footsteps in the downstairs hallways. Unlike upstairs, the old wood here is unavoidable.

She sits up and places the book next to her, hesitating before putting her feet on the floor. Out of the shadow of the sofa she sees her breath forming just below her nose. The hum of the lamp sounds like a constant roar in her ears that doesn't seem to end. The jar doesn't move. Another shuffle comes from the kitchen, only this time El knows it's the cupboards, with its long low scratch of far too old hinges. "Max?" El forces the words out of her mouth shakey as her own hands and the sharp as the chills running through her arms.

The pressure in her head feels like her skull is about to burst above her eyes. She stands up, the room even colder than before. A rush of water through the heating pipes behind her tell her that the heat is on but the room is as if a Hawkins winter came two months early.

Pushing herself forward with an unseen pressure on her shoulders guiding her, El takes each step timidly, feeling the floorboards bend under her weight.

As if she opened a door to the outside, inching closer to the jar, nothing seems right. She tries to put it all down, put it in some kind of formula where the final product is happening right in front of her but the only replacement for x is too much for her to put into her own mind.

El bends down to grab the jar and feels her joints like some kind of rust has kept them from moving and is doing everything in its power to stop her from moving ever again. In her hands the plastic jar defrosts, ice crystals melting around the inside of the lid.

With the jar in hand El looks down the hallway and into the dimly lit kitchen. A shadow passes across the wall. She drops the jar. Her fingers feel like exposed bones in snow.

Max appears at the top of the stairs with the echo of a the wooden landing.

“What are you doing up,” Max asks, her voice like a scream in the silence that El was trying so desperately to get out of.

El’s eyes dart from the landing down the stairs to the kitchen and she can feel herself holding her breath once again. The same black mass passes across the door frame. This time El sprints forward.

The kitchen is empty and still like a house returned to after weeks away. El spins around looking for something for some kind of remnant of whatever that *thing* was that passed in front of the doorway but nothing is left. Dishes remain unwashed in the sink. Glasses of water sit idly on the counter. The cupboard is closed.

Max is now behind her, El having missed her entrance looking for what’s now gone. “Did you leave the door open?” Max asks, rubbing her arms. Even in her flannel pyjamas, she’s still cold.

“How did you do it?” El asks.

“Do what?” Max responds, tilting her head to the side.

“How did you get from the kitchen and back upstairs.”

“I’ve been asleep,” Max yawns. She moves to the cupboard for a glass but El steps in front of her.

“You haven’t been downstairs all night?” El asks defiantly.

“No,” Max says, raising her eyebrows and then nods to the jar of peanut butter in El’s hand. “Clearly you need some sleep.”

“There was someone in here,” El whispers, as if they weren’t the only two in the room.

Max pinches the bridge of her nose and sighs. “Is this about last night with the door?” El doesn’t respond, so Max continues. She takes El’s hands in her own “You’re probably just seeing things. It’s an old house.”

“I’m not seeing things!” El shouts, pulling away. Twice she’d seen things and twice Max has denied them. Twice she’d felt something in her own house and twice Max didn’t listen. She feels her eyes water and heat build in her chest.

The cupboard behind El violently swings open, barely missing her head. A glass smashes against the wall on the other side of the kitchen.

El feels Max’s eyes frozen on her face.

Her throat closes.

Even if she wanted to scream, nothing would come out.

Notes for the Chapter:

i think you can tell where this is going and let me tell you, i am excited.

Author’s Note:

Thank you for reading! I'm super new at multi-chap fics so any advice is greatly appreciated! Let me know what you think!